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WAGNER'S INFLUENCE ON PRESENT-DAY COMPOSERS.

BY ANTON SEIDL.

It is probable that more has been said and written about Wagner than about any other composer that ever existed. This is not surprising, for besides being one of the greatest geniuses that the world has yet produced, he represented a revolution from musical tradition that had been held in honor for centuries, and he possessed a combination of talents, any one of which might achieve fame for any man and all of which would not only make him the object of universal attention, but the target of criticism. Under these circumstances it is only natural that in the minds of many people the true significance of his work should be either lost sight of altogether or obscured beneath the flood of literature concerning its manifold phases which has for many years poured from the press. His partisans are as prone to exaggerate his merits as his enemies are to detract from them. Nevertheless, the real Wagner stands before us in the achievements that followed one another in such rapid succession during his long career. His work must be judged by itself and in its relation to the music of his predecessors.

One of the commonest and one of the most serious mistakes about Wagner is the general belief that he was the first to appreciate the inadequacy of the old school of music, and to strive for higher forms. But, as a matter of fact, Gluck first felt this inadequacy, and his compositions show that he tried to elevate music above the level on which the composers of his day worked. The original production of *Orpheus* in Paris created a public disturbance similar to that witnessed there when Wagner had his earliest Parisian representation. But the genius of Gluck

was far inferior to Wagner's; he could only strive toward the goal that his successor attained. He deserves credit for what he tried to do, and it is not just that his efforts should be lost sight of in the glory of one who succeeded where he partly failed. Wagner's conception of what opera in its highest form should be was none the less sublime because it had dimly occurred to another.

The wedding of the drama and music—this was the underlying principle of that conception. The drama Wagner regarded as the expression of the life of man. But he saw that this expression was in a sense incomplete, that it could be made adequate, perfect, even sublime, if united with music in perfect harmony with its character and spirit. Before his time the so-called grand opera consisted chiefly of feeble *libretti*, to which primitive, almost childish melodies had been set; there was no life, no passion, no soul, in most of these works. One might be pardoned for comparing them with musical puppets singing from phonographs.

Yet, before Wagner's time, Beethoven and Weber were following in the footsteps of Gluck. But, until toward the very end of his life, Beethoven's conceptions, with the exception of his single opera *Fidelio*, were purely musical; he worked, so to speak, almost wholly in the realms of the ideal. He appreciated the possibility of expressing in music the highest human emotions, those that called for dramatic power. His symphonies and his opera show that he tried to attain this expression; they represent a steady development culminating in a splendid climax in the Ninth Symphony, when at last he found music inadequate and felt the need of words. So in the solos and choruses of this symphony he used words with fine effect. As for his opera, that embodies his attempt to express his conception of perfect conjugal love. In the case of Weber we find a composer who felt, as Wagner did, the greatness of the higher opera, and in his works he tried to make the most of the opportunities it presented. Yet he was hampered by clinging to the old forms of music, through which he expressed his ideas. Both Beethoven and Weber may be said to occupy the middle ground between the old and the new schools of compositions. But for their achievements the work of Wagner would have been far more revolutionary than it actually was. They prepared the way for him.

But the old style was still firmly established by tradition, and Wagner bravely set himself to the task of destroying tradition. He saw that the passions of mankind offered material for a noble drama fit to be the vehicle of a noble music. So he proceeded to look about for subjects suitable to his purpose. These he found in the Norse legends, which he drew upon extensively and which he developed and almost transformed by his genius.

For it should be borne in mind that Wagner's literary ability was of the highest quality ; it was in perfect harmony with the spirit of his music. Dr. Foerster, formerly director of the German Theatre in Berlin, and later of the Court Theatre in Vienna, once expressed his belief to me that if the *Meistersinger* were produced as a play, by first-class artists and under favorable surroundings, it would make a great success. In this connection I recall a remark made to me by Wagner himself on the occasion of the first performance of *Rheingold* in Berlin, which I conducted. On the programme he called it a "comic play with music," and the cast was truly ideal, made up as it was by great singers who were also great actors : Scoria, the basso, of Vienna ; Schelper, the baritone, of Leipsic ; Lieban, the comic tenor, of Berlin ; and Vogel, the heroic tenor, of Munich. At the close of the opera, Wagner, who might be supposed to think chiefly of the music and of the orchestration, said to me : "I have never seen it *acted* so well." I quote this simply to illustrate the great stress he put upon the dramatic side of grand opera. He appreciated the advantages of a composer's being able to unite in himself the two gifts of writing both book and music, for he used to say that only the composer himself knew just what he wanted to express, meaning, of course, that if he undertook to give musical color, so to speak, to the ideas of others, he would be greatly handicapped.

All composers at the present time realize that there is much truth in this belief, but few or none of them possesses the slightest literary ability. Their talent tends to isolate them from all other kinds of creative work. This fact is due partly to their education, which is special, perhaps in a sense narrow. It would be well if all musicians, before beginning their careers, could have a thorough, a well-rounded education. I have observed, however, that in youth most of them display little taste for those studies that do not bear directly or indirectly upon their art: even when they have established themselves they do very little

reading or studying outside of music. Their labors are exacting and they prefer to use their leisure in recreation and in other ways that are not at all literary.

Under these circumstances, we cannot expect our composers to follow Wagner's example by attempting to write their own *libretti*. If they did, many of them would make dreary failures. Moreover, I believe that it is possible for composer and author to work together in perfect harmony, one being simply the counter-part of the other. The slavish imitation of Wagner's methods cannot lead to good results. Each man must do his work according to his capacity; it can be nothing but folly for him to aim at results that are utterly beyond his powers, simply because one far more gifted has achieved them.

It is this slavish imitation of Wagner that has caused the barrenness of contemporary music in Germany. The young German composers, not content with being stimulated by the spirit of the master, have actually reproduced his harmonies as if these were their own. They simply give us Wagner over again, weakened, of course, by their own feebleness of imagination. They make the mistake of confounding Wagner's work with his style, both of which, though they must be considered together, are really distinct. For example, in painting, if an artist wishes to paint in the style of a Raphael, he has a perfect right to do so; but he has no right to copy a Raphael Madonna and pass it off as his own creation. So, in what has come to be called Wagnerian music, a composer may write as much of it as he pleases; but he must not steal harmonies that were conceived by another. In other words, no matter what school of music a man may choose to follow, his individuality must always rise superior to it; he must never allow it to fetter his imagination, to cause him to imitate; for imitation, of course, is death to the creative impulse.

It is perhaps natural that our young composers should be overshadowed by such a colossal figure as Wagner was, and for that matter always will be in the history of music. Those who lived while he lived, or those who are now writing while his influence is still fresh, are likely to show the effect of his power most conspicuously. But the lesson should be impressed upon every creative artist that his work, to be true, or effective, or lasting, must express himself—must spring from his own nature; otherwise, it will be the merest echo, and it will die away without leaving a

trace behind it. Let him, by all means, take advantage of the system of Wagner, and follow that. This is quite different from trying to reproduce the originator of the system.

So far as the highest form of opera is concerned, I believe that Wagner has established that forever. It seems to me to be the perfect expression of life through the union of the drama with music, and, as such, to be adequate and final. Other great composers are sure to come, but they will work according to the principles which Wagner has established. These principles are rapidly gaining recognition in most of the countries where the arts are held in honor. Even in France and Italy, Wagner is gaining recognition, and the French and Italian composers are imitating him just as their German *confrères* have been doing for the past few years. By-and-by all of these will appreciate the folly of this, and, profiting genuinely by the work he has done, they will develop music of spontaneous and genuine power.

And this brings me to a consideration of the influence of the higher music in this country. Americans have shown a fine appreciation of Wagner, though the American composers have not as yet given evidence of a disposition to imitate him in the composition of operas. Their abilities seem to lie in the writing of oratorios and concert music, and in this field there are several very promising workers; indeed, workers who have already achieved brilliantly. But I know of no reason why Americans should not write grand operas expressive of their own life. Of course, this country is so young that its history does not afford material for great conceptions as do the European countries, rich in legend and tradition. One might go for material back to the Indians, but it would be pretty thin; it would be lacking in those majestic elements which Wagner found in the Norse legends. But if an author like Mr. Howells were to write a book for an American grand opera, it seems to me that it would afford an opportunity for a composer to achieve something really great in music. But, however American the theme and treatment might be, the music could not be considered distinctively American; for it would possess qualities that might belong to almost any other nation. Moreover, it might be written by a French, or a German, or an Italian composer living in this country. For there is a great deal that is absurd in the distinctions so often made between the music of different nations. All music belongs to the

same art, and all musicians have certain fundamental qualities in common.

It must be borne in mind that the conditions by which art is surrounded in this country are peculiar. Here is a conglomerate people, made up of those who have brought from their native countries their native traditions. These traditions have their peculiar influence, and if one were keen and had patience enough to give the study necessary to detecting these, they could no doubt be traced to their sources. Dr. Dvorak, for example, has called attention to the negro melodies; but his theory with regard to them has been generally misunderstood. I have no doubt that these melodies came originally from Europe; they were probably modified, however, by the influence of the new environment upon those who brought them here. It is quite possible that the servitude of the negroes, or the laziness of their dispositions, gave to the melodies the melancholy cadence, the slow movement, that is characteristic of them. But this, of course, is only a surmise. It serves simply to illustrate my point that America has no national music, and is not likely to produce music free from European traditions.

This fact, however, cannot be considered in the least as a discouragement to American composers. The best they can do is to go on working according to the highest rules of art that have been discovered, and expressing their own individuality; for in every art there is a vast difference between nationality and individuality. There is every reason why they should rejoice that thus far they have not been enslaved by Wagner's influence, as their brother-workers in Germany have been. And from Germany they should receive their warning. The field of grand opera is open to them; it offers them the best opportunities for achievement. It is only in this field that they can work out their greatest conceptions. Wagner must be their pattern, for, as I have already said, he represents the complete development of grand opera; but as the German composers have shown, they must use his methods without abusing them.

That grand opera is destined to become a permanent institution and an educational influence in this country I have no doubt whatever. It has already been compared to a college; but it is really more important, for it educates the whole people, whereas a college educates only the few. Without it any system of civiliza-

tion is incomplete. In Germany, the leading cities have each its own opera-house ; in America, we must begin with one only, and that, of course, should be in the chief city. But an opera established in New York could exert its influence in several of the other leading cities by giving adequate performances in these at different periods during the season. Later, such cities as Boston and Chicago should have operas of their own, just as Leipsic and Dresden have at the present time.

Until a movement in this direction is inaugurated we cannot expect American composers to achieve in grand opera ; for, under the conditions in which they are now working, they receive practically no encouragement whatever to make such artistic endeavor. The labor of writing an opera is enormous ; the rewards should be proportionate ; but so far as this country is concerned, they are so meagre that they might as well be left out of account altogether. This is a disheartening fact, but we might as well face the truth. However, as I have intimated, I believe that the conditions will be changed—that the time is coming when American composers will receive an incentive to put forth their best efforts. Some of them, indeed, are already doing so in spite of discouragement, for there are composers who care more for their art than for gain. I know of one American composer who has written his own *libretto* and is now at work on the music for it. All this promises well for the future.

To those American musicians who are ambitious to undertake the writing of grand opera I can only reiterate the great lesson which Wagner has given them and which I emphasized at the beginning of this article ; that is, the fundamental importance of making the music the natural expression of the drama. In other words, the *libretto* must be regarded as the basis of the work ; and as this is essentially a play, as much a play, indeed, as any that is spoken and acted, it must be treated according to the laws of dramatic construction. For this reason, the composer, before putting pen to paper, before even conceiving a harmony, must catch the spirit of the *libretto*, and study it in every detail from the point of view of the drama. To do this adequately, he should be thoroughly acquainted with the inner workings of the theatre ; everything should be regarded in its effect as passing from the stage to the auditorium. Of course, the composer who writes his own words knows best just what kind of music fits

them ; but even he must look at his work as a dramatic whole. He who, on the other hand, composes to words written for him must assume the same point of view that the librettist has taken in developing the plot.

As a preparation for such work, nothing can be finer than the study of Wagner's operas, representing as they do the perfect blending of the drama and music. They should be examined in every detail, for in all their minute parts this quality is evident. The danger of such study I have pointed out ; but by those who are warned against this danger beforehand and who appreciate the significance of the warning, it can be avoided. Its existence is in no sense a reflection upon the master's genius ; on the contrary, it is a tribute to the overwhelming power of that genius. And at the present time, to American musicians who have shown a love for Wagner, but who have as yet refrained from imitating him, he offers at once an example and an incentive.

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